

Living With Oxymorons

An oxymoron is when two words with contradictory meanings are used to describe a person or thing. Some oxymorons are humorous: submissive cat, slow-growing kudzu and Yankee-style grits. Other phrases become oxymorons depending upon one's point of view: corporate ethics, liberal Baptist or fun committee meeting.

But a new oxymoron has recently become my favorite—forced democracy.

From the beginning of the war against Iraq, church members, politicians and news analysts have praised efforts to bring freedom and democracy to the people of Iraq. But no one has bothered to ask the Muslim majority in Iraq if in fact they want a democracy.

President Bush said in a speech on April 28 that “Iraq will be democratic.” This statement came on the heels of a remark by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which he said the U.S. will not allow an Islamic government in Iraq.

Every other nation in the region, except for Israel and Turkey, does not operate under a democratic government. Yet American leaders insist the Iraqi people want democracy.

Others question whether a democracy is even possible in Iraq, with its embedded Islamic culture and diverse tribal backgrounds.

But of all people, Americans should be experts on freedom and democracy. If we intend true freedom for the Iraqis, how can we impose democracy?

Growing up in a Baptist church in South Carolina, I remember hearing for the first time that Baptists believed that all people have the freedom to choose to believe in God. “Even,” as my junior-high Sunday-school teacher said, “the right to choose not to believe in God.”

It took some time to trust those words. At first I was perplexed by the Baptist

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enthusiasm for evangelism. Why spend time urging and praying for people to become Christians when they may choose not to believe? I learned that granting others the freedom to reject God doesn't require that we muzzle ourselves in witness. But this kind of freedom does insist that we evangelize by example and not by coercion.

Perhaps as the rebuilding of Iraq goes forward, America's leadership needs to learn the same lesson. True freedom for the Iraqi people should mean that they have the opportunity to affirm or reject a government of their own choosing.

As democratic and freedom-loving Americans, we can enthusiastically proclaim the benefits of a democracy but at the same time recognize the right of the Iraqis to disagree.

If instead we force democracy upon a people who choose to reject it, then the message we send is that democracy is nothing more than the exercise of those with power upon those who have none. In that case, the meaning of both freedom and democracy will be undermined for years to come.

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